

All Is Not Well Down on the Waterfront

Written by Rob Bauer

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As we begin a new year, it is interesting to note some unfortunate happenings down on the waterfront.

The present administration has let the Working Waterfront Bill be its gift for 2006 to the waterfront community and does not expect any groaning if other things are not right. Well, I hate to be the one to say that the glass is half empty, but from where I stand it looks like the glass is on its side, and draining fast.

We are beginning to see an end to one kind of fishing on the Maine Coast due to the increasing strength of the lobster lobby and a lack of vision and expertise by our elected and appointed officials who are supposed to be stewards of the Marine environment. Fishing boats that tow a net or a drag are about to become extinct. The fixed gear fishermen and politicians in Augusta have joined forces with tree huggers to stamp out the last remains of a fishery that has yet to kill any whales.

We have the lobster lobby steadfast in its refusal to help the trawlermen by bending on the law that doesn't allow lobsters to be landed in Maine, thus forcing what is left of the groundfish fleet in Portland to sell its catch in Gloucester, where it is legal. The irony here is that many years ago, when there were other things to catch than lobsters, most lobstermen fished both mobile and fixed gear.

But alas, the mobile gear fisheries are almost gone in Maine. The scallop, urchin, mussel and crab fisheries are in a state of collapse. We have plenty of shrimp but, due in part to our free trade policies, no market. The question therefore is: why bother to help our brothers and sisters in the mobile gear fisheries? The answer, I fear, will be found with the lobsterman down at the \$100 table at Foxwoods Casino.

And what of lobsters this year? To begin, we now have a cute tag that proclaims their "Maineness" in a free trade world that cares less about label and more about price. Great labeling didn't stop dealers from offering 30 percent less to the lobstermen this December than last, and why was there a small strike by lobstermen in Rockland over the price the week before Christmas? Could it be that we have been lulled into the fluff and believe those ads about Maine? You know, Maine, the way PRICES should be. It was free trade, a policy embraced by both sides of the aisle, that foreclosed on your boat, not the local dealer or the bank.

And what of our lobster industry future? How is it that a fishery that has a positive environmental label manages to kill so many whales? And how is it that the response to that problem is so lopsided in a state with such an active Green Party? Why is it that the College of the Atlantic can exist to save and study whales, and yet not be a significant part of the whale/lobster industry dialogue? College of the Atlantic's mission will ultimately result in hundreds of tons of plastic rope being carted off to our landfills, traps being left on the bottom to foul the ocean for years to come (much worse than the effect of a dragger) and more demand for petro chemicals as lobstermen attempt to find a rope that is whale-friendly. It is as if both groups were on the same road but never bothered to notice each other. The Green Party should come down to the dump and help us dispose of all that rope we will be throwing away.

This was a year for records from Mother Nature. But here's a weather bad news that you don't hear about too much. The Eastern Shelf Buoy off Winter Harbor is showing a water temperature of 46 degrees as I write this piece on Jan 12. It should be 38 degrees. It is a well-supported theory that our cold winters are part of the reason for our healthy lobsters. The cold water discourages parasites and disease. The good news: the whale-watching season is definitely longer now.

The Elitist Institute, oh sorry, I meant the Island Institute, recently ran an article proclaiming the success of our burgeoning farm-raised oyster industry. I guess making money doesn't factor into their idea of success. The price of oysters is lower now than it was 10 years ago. Due to the implementation of the

nanny state by our friendly environmentalists, shellfish is no longer considered safe to eat, unless it is cooked. Large restaurant chains often won't carry raw shellfish due to the insurance risk. There is plenty of farm-raised shellfish throughout the world and we will be slowly put out of business by free trade, as other countries pump more and more subsidies into their aquaculture industries. Despite what the Maine Aquaculture Association claims, the Wendy's in Bangor has a bigger payroll than all the oyster growers in Maine. Yet that industry is shown to be a huge success by this administration, kind of like Dirigo, I guess.

The allocation of the common, fishing rights, logging rights, mining rights, etc., has always been messy in the United States. As a nation, we continue to subscribe to the highest bid model and that often means no bid, as we now also have very high costs. Our food resource extraction industries have always thrived in part because we have had low energy costs. This is no longer true and the lobstermen of Maine and the fishermen of the United States are all suffering under the new energy paradigm. There is no Toyota Prius for our fleet. This new energy paradigm, along with a need to create jobs in other countries, means other countries will continue to do what is necessary to ensure that their exports thrive. The result: no shrimp market, low prices for lobsters and a shrinking market for farm-raised shellfish. It is the future with free trade and high energy costs.

In Maine at the close of 2006, we have lost our mobile gear fisheries, aquaculture continues to be seen as the "stay the course" program for many politicians, despite the evidence that there is no meaningful contribution to the state from an economic point of view and global warming may undo all the good conservation measures that have ensured the success of the lobster fishery in Maine.

Allocation of our marine common resources continues to be done in a non-democratic, non-performance-based fashion by those in high places, with no representation from the middle ground. There are solutions for these troubles and I offer my 2007 wish list as a start:

1. That we appoint Sen. George Mitchell to negotiate an end to the war between lobstermen and trawlermen and save the Portland Fish Exchange.
2. That the State Planning Board gives up its coastal zone monies from the feds and gets behind the establishment of a Coastal Zone Management Council so that the allocation of the common can have some democratic guidelines.
3. That the Green Party/College of the Atlantic become part of the solution and not the problem. They could start by allocating monies to a social amend such as a health insurance program for those involved in commercial fishing.
4. That community-based fisheries management does not get killed by CLF and other environmental organizations that continue to see resource extraction industries as evil.
5. That more fishermen like Sherm Hutchins of Stonington start sending letters and attending meetings in Augusta.
6. That on Dec 30, 2007, the water temperature at the Eastern Shelf Buoy will be 39 degrees and there is 2 feet of snow on the top of Cadillac Mountain.

If there was some ice around, I would sign off as always "Keep your stick on the ice."

Instead, I'll just say Happy New Year.

Rob Bauer of Blue Hill is the president of Maine's Best Seafood, which closed in 2006 due to the collapse of the local mussel, crab and scallop fisheries.